



NEW BEDFORD FISHING HERITAGE CENTER

Date of Interview March 25, 2017

Chavis, Alexander ~ Oral History Interview

Corinn Williams

Chavis, Alexander Interview by Corinn Williams *Workers on the New Bedford Waterfront*. New Bedford Fishing Heritage Center. March 25, 2017

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Interview with Alexander Chavis, March 25, 2017.

Background

Name of person interviewed: Alexander (Wilmor) Chavis

Facts about this person:

Age	27
Sex	Male
Occupation	Bergie's Seafood
Residence (Town where lives)	New Bedford
Ethnic background (if known)	El Salvador

Interviewer: Corinn Williams

Transcriber: Corinn Williams

Interview location: Community Economic Development Center, New Bedford

Date of interview: March 25, 2017

Key Words: Fish processing, cutting, packing, ice, fish cutting machine, skinning machine, fish cutting , teaching pallet, orders, New York, Boston, New Bedford, .

Abstract

Alexander Chavis is from El Salvador and has been working at Bergie's Seafood for 11 ½ years. He has learned all of the tasks involved with processing fish and preparing orders for customers. He enjoys his job and teaching new workers how to cut and pack fish. He considers Bergie's his second home.

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[00:00] Intro; from Cuscutlan, El Salvador and came to the US when he was 16 years old to seek better opportunities. Had friends and family in New Bedford who helped him get his first job packing fish. He liked it a lot and he is happy working in seafood processing.

[05:07] Before coming to the US he used to help his mother in her business, a small restaurant in her home. His mother didn't want him to go because he helped her out a lot. He was going to school and wanted to become a teacher, but he knew it would cost too much to go to University. He has only one brother left in El Salvador and four siblings are here now, all work in the seafood processing. Works with Salvadorans but the majority here are Guatemalans. There are also Portuguese and Americans where he works. He was surprised to hear different languages; sometimes you get yelled at if you don't understand. His first boss when he started in 2006 was Portuguese. He spoke a little Spanish and he was a good person.

[09:09] First job was at Bergie's. He learned how to do the job from his first boss, how to pack, ways to put the fish in the boxes put ice on them. His boss gave him a lot of support to train him. Learned how to skin and cut fish. Now knows a little bit of everything at the plant. He has been working at the company for 11 ½ years.

On a typical day he has to supply the fish cutters with fish in amounts needed to fill the orders on time. It is a process of "cut, pack and send." Work begins at 6 AM or sometimes 7 AM. Frozen fish from Canada is thawed in water and broken apart. It takes about two hours to prepare blocks of frozen fish the day before and put it in water and then the next day thaw it in more water so that it is ready. Fresh fish from the boats is put in the cooler until ready to process. His job is to coordinate the process, to prepare the orders for shipping and to make sure the order is complete.

[15:26] The orders go to fish wholesalers. They work as a team helping and teaching each other. He likes to teach other workers how to cut fish and pack fish.

Work uniforms and conditions, dealing with the cold. Fish cutting machines for flatfish and the other is for cod, the frozen fish. Fresh fish is for yellow tail, flounder, dabs, grey sole. Fresh cod and haddock is still by hand.

[20:10] Equipment used is cutting machine and pallet jack. Load 10 pallets a day to Boston and 5 to 7 pallets for the local market. 10 pallets are about 10,000 lbs. of fish. The local trucks pick up the product. Hardest part of the job is learning the different kinds of fish and the smell of fish. Not everyone can take it. But he likes all aspects of his job, has no complaints.

[24:41] There are less fish in the winter, fewer boats go out fishing when the weather is bad and there is less production. Later when the boats come in and bring 50,000 lbs. of fish then there is a lot of production. Summertime is when the boats bring in scallops and all different kinds of fish. Demand and production are higher in March and April during the Easter season. When he started 12 people cut fish by hand. Cutting machines make production much faster; the hand cut filets are better quality but takes more time to process, longer hours. Owners have to think about price and competition, all of the companies in New Bedford use machines.

[29:36] Women clean the fish and put it through the skinning machine. Fish is washed in a tank of water and cleaned off of bones or skin. Then fish is packed, weighed and put in boxes. Ice is put in the boxes. The pallet is wrapped, labeled and then put in the truck. Most earn minimum wage but get raises with experience. 18 people work in his area. Most workers have experience but there are some new workers. New workers first learn to clean fish and to pack fish.

Women do different jobs because they can't lift heavy things and men do the heavy work. They put ice in the boxes, wrap the pallets, work with the frozen fish to thaw then in the tubs. The men are in charge of cutting fish. We all work together, sometimes women work in the skinning machine.

[36:34] There are four different nationalities that are working at the company: Portuguese, Guatemalan, Salvadoran and American. People speak Spanish, Portuguese and English. Some of the Guatemalans speak their own language, some of the Americans only speak English. Increase in Central Americans working at the company.

[39:44] There is less fish coming in now than in the past. The boats are more limited in how much they can bring in. He used to work 13 or 14 hours a day or 8-10 hours a day. The challenge of the job is to be careful because some of the work is dangerous. One can cut fingers or bang legs on the pallets, injure hands on the machines. One needs to be very focused in what you are doing. He keeps working in fish processing because he like it a lot and it is his second home. Respects the first boss, the Portuguese man who was like a Grandfather to me.

[47:34] End of interview